



Research Article

An Intercultural Lens on the Japanese Noh Theater Play Takasago

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Filipino and Japanese participants' perceptions of a publicly available, pre-recorded performance of the Noh play, Takasago. These perceptions are made from the point of view of aural, visual, kinesthetic, and linguistic elements of performance, referred to as semiotic clusters (SC). Comparative data drawn from both the Philippines and Japan, which reveal connective threads and commonalities are presented. Self-reflexive observations by Filipinos on their own performing arts traditions are also shared in the paper.

Findings are based on a reduced research framework of the project Linking Japan to the World through the Performing Arts: Collaborative Ethnography and Intercultural Exchange (JSPS 20K01193), which commenced just before the outbreak of COVID-19. This originally intended breadth of research is outlined, and the paper addresses the disruption because of the pandemic, reporting on those tangible achievements that could be made given the circumstances.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The present age offers unprecedented access to the fascinating allure of a vast variety of music, dance, and theatrical performances. And beyond aesthetic pleasure, there is much to be learned from such resources, as they reach beyond surface-level culture, operating as a “microcosmic culture-capsule disseminating symbolically the essence [of a culture]” (Rockell, “Fiesta” 62; “Knowing Noh” 4). In this paper, the rich resources inherent in such a culture-capsule are drawn on from the point of view of semiotic clusters (SC): Aural, visual, kinesthetic, and linguistic elements of performance. This work concludes the research project *Linking Japan to the World through the Performing Arts: Collaborative Ethnography and Intercultural Exchange* (JSPS 20K01193), which commenced just prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In reduced form, due to unforeseen global circumstances, the paper examines Japanese and Filipino participants’ perceptions of a publicly available, pre-recorded section of the Noh play, Takasago (高砂), a *kami mono* (神物)[God play] written by one of the founders of Japanese Noh, Zeami Motokiyo, and set in the early spring evening in Takasago Bay, Hyogo prefecture (Gardner 203-240; Tyler 19-52). Admittedly, a far more extensive cultural exchange between Japan, the Philippines, and Taiwan was envisaged at the outset of the project, as explained below. Nevertheless, tangible achievements could be made given the circumstances and these are reported. By presenting what was achieved under conditions of severe disruption in a positive light, one hopes to find closure and formally complete the project. The methodology section of this paper presents the reduced research framework applied in developing the current paper and information on the Noh play Takasago. Comparative data from Japan, Philippines, and very briefly Taiwan are included in the Results and Discussion, before moving on to the Conclusion.

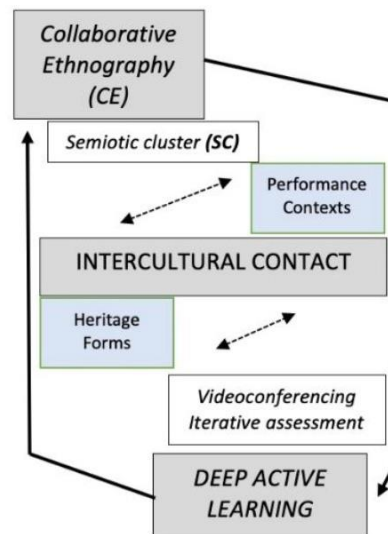
In its original form, as conceived in 2019, the research project funded by the Japanese Society for the Promotion of Science (Grant number JSPS 20K01193)

pursued a deeper understanding of how performing arts positively promote intercultural contact. This appeared necessary at the time as Japanese society was increasingly heterogeneous, and groups of people from various backgrounds were arriving to live in Japan (Mizukami 174-175; Tsuneyoshi 177). Considering multicultural festivals and educational exchanges that link Japan culturally to the world, the project originally intended to focus on heritage forms with rich histories and broad semiotic content, such as Japanese Noh and Philippine Rondalla (Emmert 137; Rockell, 2012). Participants in Japan and at partner sites overseas were to prepare, present, and appraise each other’s performances by applying group-focused, collaborative ethnography (CE) (Chatzidakis and Maclaran 510-511; Rofel and Yanagisako 3-4) to semiotic clusters (SC) of visual, kinesthetic and linguistic elements, alongside sound (aural) elements.

The way these processes strengthen communicative competencies and increase intercultural understanding was intended to be assessed. The performing arts were to be seen to operate as a site of intercultural interaction and learning, which could be examined as to how to most positively promote intercultural contact with Japan as participants would use CE to interculturally appraise performances in Japan and at partner sites overseas. Underlying this was the idea that positive intercultural contact helps people realize the complexity of their own identities whilst affirming the underlying interconnectedness of peoples and cultures.

Further analysis was to be viewed through the lens of Morris’ six-factor process (sign vehicle, significatum, interpretant, interpreter, context, and denotatum), with a particular emphasis on the syntactic dimension or the relationship between the signs (Baggio 87-88). In addition, it was intended that the extended cross-cultural comparison by Japanese students and other participants in the Philippines and Taiwan would shed new light on their own cultural heritage. It was thought that awareness of their reflexive “otherness” afforded them a stronger position for ongoing dialog and a basis for cultivating intercultural understanding (Rudolph 85; Saito et al. 712).

Figure 1
Originally intended workflow



As originally proposed, the research model first examined the syntactic dimension of SC through CE in situations where performing arts facilitated intercultural contact, such as at videoconferencing, educational exchanges, and multicultural festivals. This was to take place between Japan and partner sites in Taiwan and the Philippines. CE working groups were to be formed at each site, and SC data on performances at home sites and at each partner site was to be collected. This data was then to be examined, focusing on the syntactic dimension of the semiotic process. The impact of this project on the intercultural understanding of student-participants was to be assessed iteratively throughout the project. In addition, at key points, open-ended written questionnaires, cross-checked by both instructors and student participants at each site, were to be implemented in order to gain further insights into these processes.

With a supportive team of international research collaborators in place, the grant application outlined above was successful and funding was secured to commence the project officially on 1 April 2020. Unfortunately, the emergence of COVID-19 cast a dark shadow on what had been an auspicious start. This disruption couldn't have come at a worse time, as described in the following section.

Having made the intensive efforts required to secure a successful grant application, obtain human rights permissions and carefully coordinate fieldwork plans with research collaborators, the world seemed to come to a sudden halt and an eerie silence prevailed in the skies now empty of airplanes. Amidst uncertain ongoing conditions, restrictions on live public performance (Chatzichristodoulou et al. 1-6), and the sudden pressure to move teaching online (Khanal 89-90), the general worldwide disruption had a very negative impact on this

research project. Ironically, while potential digital communication pathways remained intact, and in the case of my own university workplace, even improved in response to the circumstances, they were of little to no help in maintaining contact with research collaborators outside Japan. Given the complex, extensive, and unpredictable ways that their lives had also changed as a result of COVID-19 the result was "radio silence."

This situation has invited much scholarly reflection. An Internet search using Google Scholar on Friday January 26, 2024, yielded 246,000 hits for the combined search terms COVID-19 & Performing arts, and 363,000 hits for COVID-19 & Music. The variety within this considerable body of work can be exemplified by studies, such as Lee et al. on the cultural policies of South Korea, Japan, and China in response to COVID-19 (145-165) and Yakura et al. on how Japanese idol groups found alternative ways to approximate a sense of physical contact and intimacy with their fans under the restriction posed by COVID-19 (Yakura et al.; Terasawa et al.).

From a performers' perspective, Australia-based Filipino musician Anacin writes on the reflexive discussion of the affordances of online streaming performances and the "sociological underpinnings of online gigs" amidst the necessary transition to online performance during the pandemic (Anacin 256). Without deliberately setting out to do so, my own work during this period necessarily touched on COVID's influence, offering, with reservations, "testament to the idea that social science and humanities research can be carried out to some extent via the Internet, quickly adapting to using such digital tools, such as conferencing apps and extensive web searches" (Rockell, 2022b, p. 43).

2. METHODOLOGY

By reframing approaches and expectations, and thanks to the Japan Society of the Promotion of Science (JSPS), which allowed multiple extensions of the research period, two tangible research achievements were accomplished. The first of these was Migrant Contributions to the Tainan Soundscape (Rockell, 2022b). Initially, we had planned to explore performances by the the Pazeh people of Nantou under the guidance of Taiwanese research collaborator Jessie Hsieh. Suddenly, Ms. Hsieh messaged urgently that “the COVID-19 pandemic getting worse, the university might announce school closure at any time ...” (J. Hsieh. Personal correspondence, April 8, 2020). After that, we lost contact entirely for more than a year. Before this Ms. Hsieh had already mentioned the Siraya people of Tainan, and her suggestion eventually led to a paper. Migrant Contributions to the Tainan Soundscape shares findings on the music of church-based Filipino migrant musicians in Tainan, the revitalization of Siraya language and culture through music, and the difficulties of conducting fieldwork online. This connection was also facilitated by Tobie Openshaw, Affiliated Research Fellow at the University of Central Lancashire, Centre for Austronesian Studies, whose own plans during this period had “one by one ... just absolutely ground to a halt.”

This included his efforts to arrange an alternative research collaborator and student participant group in Taipei.

Openshaw was sympathetic:

“All my academic friends have similar stories of projects just being completely put on hold. Because you can’t go out into communities. You can’t go and do the fieldwork. You can’t have face to face interactions with people” (T. Openshaw, Zoom interview, May 17, 2022).

The second tangible achievement was Noh, Zen and Now (Rockell, 2022c), which presents only Japanese participants’ semiotic reflections based on a pre-recorded, publicly available Japanese performance resource. Perhaps in the case of Noh, Zen and Now, the travel restrictions, and the correspondingly more fixed, domestic orientation were not entirely harmful. This paper was Japan-focused and more closely linked to the original research project, although its publication was considerably delayed.

Another positive outcome of a situation of enforced restrictions was the opportunity to reflect and report on previous work (Rockell, 2022a, 2022d; Rockell & Bussinguer-Khavari, 2022). Opportunities to present work online and virtually that was either directly or indirectly related to this project at online conferences and performance workshops also increased substantially during this period. These included *Rondalya Interrupted: Early Flows, Asia-Pacific Distribution and Semiotic Clusters* at the IMS Study Group on the Global History of Music hosted by the Graduate Institute of Musicology, National Taiwan University in 2021 and *Contemporary Compositions for*

Philippine Rondalya: The role of the guitar presented at Ball State University, Indiana USA in 2022.

This current paper, to which I have given the title An Intercultural Lens on the Japanese Noh Theater Play Takasago, aims to become the third and final tangible research achievement in this project. Combining data from the Philippines and Japan, it attempts to provide a little of the cross-culture perspective which was the original goal of the project. This paper expands on the two achievements mentioned above by including Filipino participants’ reflections on the same publicly available digital performance resource and how it contrasts with performances in the Philippines. COVID-19 disruption drastically impacted research collaborator Wilfredo Valois, who was based at the University of Santo Tomas in the Philippines but by necessity became more involved in local governance in his municipality of Famy, Laguna province during this time. I am very grateful to Juliet Bien, Assistant Professor in the Department of Arts and Communication, College of Arts and Sciences at the University of the Philippines, who agreed to step in and help provide invaluable Philippine perspectives, which made it possible to complete the project. In addition, in November 2021 it was possible to reconnect with Jessie Hsieh in Taiwan, who, after relocating to a new teaching post was able to provide brief feedback from a workshop to her students.

In order to persevere and complete this project under the circumstances, it was necessary to apply a much-reduced research framework. We dealt with Japanese Noh only, leaving aside Philippine rondalla and the performances of aboriginal groups in Taiwan. Rather than groups preparing, presenting, and appraising each other’s original performances, we were forced to rely only on a pre-recorded example that was publicly available via the Internet instead (Hōshō-ryū maibayashi).

As the reader may be aware, Noh is a “form of traditional Japanese theater with a 700-year history, which combines poetry, drama, music, song and dance” (Rockell, 2020, p. 2). A 2-minute segment of a video excerpt from the play *Takasago* [高砂] (Serper 323), was chosen, and performed on a traditional stage by members of the *Hōshō* school [宝生流] which was the same style I had been learning. Also, within the recommended 2-minute segment, *utai* [chanting], *shimai* [dance], and *hayashi* [instrumental ensemble] were all included. Apart from these considerations, the choice of excerpt was arbitrary.

Takasago is a well-known Noh play set during Spring at Takasago Bay (present-day Takasago City Hyogo Prefecture) and Sumiyoshi (present-day Osaka). In the play, a chief priest travels to Sumiyoshi shrine, where he witnesses a magnificent dance after hearing an old couple sweeping beneath a pine tree in Takasago Bay speak of the joy of long life and the origin of the paired pines *aioi* [相生],

“two yet not two,” symbolizing an affirmation of non-duality in Buddhism (Tyler “Buddhism in Noh” 28).

The ambitious suite of real-time cross-cultural communicative activities was abandoned, and the main focus of the study became data provided by participants at Komazawa University in Japan and students of Assistant Professor Bien at the University of the Philippines. Both the participants in the Philippines and those in Japan were enrolled in English medium culture-related courses but neither group was majoring in music or performing arts.

Rather than employing more extensive collective ethnography (CE), an approach that seeks to prioritize collaboration at each step of the research process (Lassiter 15), participants were encouraged to provide individual, asynchronous, online SC feedback, which was later collated. An example of CE Directions for CE element “visual” appears in the list below:

If you are in a real-time face-to-face or online class, listen to general orientation about semiotic clusters. Then:

1. Watch the Multimedia example.
2. In your group (or alone), think about the visual (colors, lights, shapes, shading, etc.) aspects of the performance.
3. What is it about the visual (colors, lights, shapes, shading, etc.) aspects of this performance that makes it “Japanese”?
4. How is this different visually from the performances of other countries and cultures? For example, the Philippines or Taiwan.

Japanese participants input their reflections on prominent features of each SC element weekly using pre-prepared quizzes such as the example in the list above, in the online interactive learning environment Moodle during the spring and summer semesters of 2021. The same platform had been prepared for groups in the Philippines and Taiwan, but they preferred sending their feedback directly. A basic orientation to the activity was prepared in MP4 format and sent in advance to each of the research collaborators outside Japan. Assistant Professor Bien’s students provided their feedback via Gmail in June 2022. In the next section, SC observations from participants in the

Philippines and Japan are presented in tables and brief summaries below. Additional feedback comparing Filipino and Japanese cultures appears in the discussion section. All participants took voluntarily and gave permission to use their responses, which are drawn on and presented anonymously in this paper.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Semiotic clusters (SC): Japan and the Philippines

3.1. Visual elements

Japanese participants reported that in contrast to the simple, natural, and plain colors, the gold *sensu* or folding fan was seen to stand out, and they thought that the sober and plain appearance of this Noh performance and the shape of the pine tree, which “very much conveys a sense of Japanese taste” made the performance “Japanese.” Visually, they saw it as embodying *omomuki* 趣 or *fuzei* 風情 (taste) and representing *ma* 間 or “the space between.” One participant commented that in Japanese culture, “it is considered beautiful to fit in with nature.” Others were under the impression that traditional dances outside Japan are participatory and festive, whereas traditional Japanese things are “mainly for watching.” Based on my own experience living in three locations in Japan over a 10-year period, this idea is seemingly refuted by the persistence of the *bon odori* 盆踊り held annually throughout the country towards the end of August.

As seen in Tables 1 below, while the Filipino participants made similar observations about the color of costumes and fans, unlike Japanese participants they did not comment on masks or facial expressions. Compared to the Filipinos, Japanese participants offered slightly more positive descriptors, such as “very chic”, and “harmonious.”

Philippine participants saw the hand-held folding fan as characteristic of Japan, while the Japanese commented on the pine tree. Also, Japanese participants tended to emphasize details and shapes, while the Filipino participants tended to emphasize spatial dimensions to a greater extent.

Table 1

The Philippine participant’s observations: Visual

Visual (collaborative ethnography observations, The Philippines 2022)		
Characteristics		
Color (& light)	Shape (& form)	Observed Movement
Simple, vivid, unique	Vivid and unique	Very clean and precise Maintaining stiff and elegant posture
Black, brown, dark (costumes)	Symmetrical (in terms of performers orientation on stage)	Upper body barely moved (except for their hands that were holding the fans)
Yellow (background & fan) Gold (fan)		
Visual (collaborative ethnography observations, The Philippines 2022)		

Equipment (<i>das Zeug</i>)		
Accessories	Costumes	Stage (and stage background)
<p>Fan gold color, held by main character, used as accent to stand out from background features, seen as “characteristic of Japan” (from the Filipino perspective)</p> <p>[Masks and unmasked faces not mentioned]</p>	<p>Uniform wearing same clothes and colors, traditional, plain, and non-printed, seen as characteristic of Japan” (from the Filipino perspective)</p> <p>“Wide flowy” clothing</p> <p><i>Kimono, Haori</i> and <i>Hakama</i> identified</p>	<p>Stage and lighting Simple, non-distracting Background Traditional, wide, monotone, yellow</p> <p>Large “bonsai-looking” tree (pine tree) “and some other elements of nature” are the only visual elements on stage</p>

3.2. Aural Elements

Japanese participants recognized a limited range of pitches and timbre. The timbre of Japanese drums and flute was thought to evoke a sense of *wa* 和 or harmony and peace, and natural, low, and strong male voices were considered to be characteristically Japanese.

It was interesting to note the uniform behavior that Philippine participants observed in other categories (posture, alignment, etc.) don’t seem to apply to the aural elements. Further, they characterized melodic and rhythmic elements as “quasi” and not immediately evident, as seen in Table 2 below.

Table 2

The Philippine participant’s observations: Aural

Aural (collaborative ethnography observations, The Philippines 2022)			
Musical dimension(s)			
Melody/pitch	Rhythm /tempo	Timbre/other	
<p><i>Quasi-melodic:</i> In places, every two syllables are paired (the first syllable a lower note and the second a higher note. Although they are not signing it creates “something like a melody”)</p>	<p><i>Quasi-rhythmic:</i> There seems to be a rhyme in the [spoken] lines, apart from the rhythm</p> <p>Slow</p> <p>Vowels and “words” elongated, drawn out longer</p>	<p>Voice “very thin”, using “chest voice”, rounder, fuller, serious, deep tone</p> <p>Chant sounds “stoic”</p> <p>Mix of singing and speaking</p> <p>Pronunciation loud, clear, and audible</p>	
Aural (collaborative ethnography observations, Japan 2020–2021)			
Sound source(s)			
Voice	Flute	Drum(s)	Other
<p>Singing Modulated, monotonal, with clear vibrato, “backed up” by other voices in parts</p> <p>Chanting <i>Not uniform</i> *Chorus chanting “all with distinct voices” [“one had a deeper voice, one had a higher voice, and so on”]</p>	<p>N/A</p>	<p>“A beat from a drum-like instrument became audible at some point in the chant”</p>	<p>Minimal to no distracting background noise or music, makes dialogues more clearly audible</p> <p>Lead performer’s chant most prominent (major audio element)</p>

*One notes that the uniform behavior observed in other categories (posture, alignment, etc. doesn’t seem to apply to the aural elements)

3.3. Kinesthetic elements

For Japanese participants, kinesthetic or aspects of body movement, balance, and awareness were

characterized as slow and calm, straight or circular, and including fast to slow dynamics. The movement was seen to express *wabisabi* 侘び寂び, and participants felt there

was no excessive movement and that “although the movement is simple, *it does not lose personality.*” Japanese participants linked the self-perception of Japanese people being in general comparatively “less impatient” than people in other countries to the quality of slowness pervasive in Noh. Body posture was seen as sturdy and well-balanced, and the sliding feet walking style was beautiful and graceful.

They considered kneeling to be a unique feature of Japanese performance. They felt that, compared with other countries’ performers, who are “usually running around the stage and saying their lines loudly,” Japanese performers are more tasteful and softer. However, one participant felt

that the body movements in Noh appeared “uptight” and not the kind of body movement one encounters daily.

The significance of ‘non-movement’ in contrast to movement also arose. One of these Japanese participants commented that Japanese performances contain a beautiful element of “stillness”, and that this “stillness” is what makes the performances Japanese.

As shown in Table 3 below, the Philippine participants’ kinesthetic, or aspects of body movement, balance, and awareness, mainly included similar positive characterization, such as graceful, delicate, subtle, poised, and elegant. However, less positive observations about movement being stiff and lacking variety were also made.

Table 3

The Philippine participant’s observations: Kinesthetic

Kinesthetic (collaborative ethnography observations, The Philippines 2022)				
General Characteristics				
Manner or quality of movement	Direction	Spatiality	Speed	
No unnecessary or distracting movement Limited, calculated, clean, precise, minimal, graceful, controlled, delicate, subtle, poised, elegant, formal (especially the opening of the fan) simple, solemn (including way of walking and holding a fan) Stiff (especially the main character’s walk) Little variety	No evident choreography	<i>Juitai</i> lined up horizontally Bodies occupy only a small area Only one man is standing (main character) and the rest (<i>juitai/hayashi</i>) are sitting	Slow	

The Body				
Head	Upper body (and arms)	Lower body (and feet)	Posture/General/Other	
(Not Mentioned)	Still and straight Barely move, except for hands holding the fans The main character’s upper body does not move during turns The Greatest degree of “flourish” in movement came from the arm manipulating the fan and only he moves his arms	The main character’s turns originate from his feet (upper body does not move) Almost “squatted” (main character while standing and walking) When he stands up it is without the support of his hands (using lower body strength alone)	Straight, upright, erect, poised, good, elegant, stiff <i>Juitai’s seiza</i> (kneeling posture) recognized as a traditional way of Japanese sitting Bodies appear fragile while acting robustly at the same time	

3.4. Linguistic elements

Japanese participants recognized the importance as well as the specificity of language:

“Different languages express different styles and meanings ... many languages have specific words that cannot be replaced. In life, we can't do without language. In addition, the charm of language in performance creation is endless.” They considered that the language of the performance, including the quality of voice, lyrics, and singing style, all express Japanese[ness].

However, while the language was seen to have programmatic, directive, expressive, and historically emblematic functions, in everyday terms, it was

incomprehensible. The preservation of this dramatic form relatively unchanged was seen as admirable. Still, when dealing with an ancient language, the trade-off is incomprehensibility, keeping as it were to the letter rather than the spirit of the law.

As seen in Table 4 below, Filipino participants also found the language used incomprehensible. However, they recognized that it differed from the Japanese language, which they usually encountered through travel, media, or education. Filipino participants recognized literary and stylistic associations and offered the practical suggestion that translations should be provided.

Table 4

The Philippine participant's observations: Linguistic

Linguistic (collaborative ethnography observations, The Philippines 2022)		
Signified (after Saussure)		
Comprehensibility/Meaning	Style	General/other
Language barrier	Poetic	
Unable understand anything at all		Repetition with variation in
Japanese, mother tongue, native language, the “local language of the performers” used (but sounds “recognizably different” from Japanese encountered on visits to Japan)	Formal	“vocal flourish” at the end of lines (sentences) observed
	Very engaging (Manner of delivering dialogues through speaking and/or singing)	
Signifier (after Saussure)		
Voice/pronunciation	Script/writing	General/other
Simple “due to an abundance of vowel-dominated syllables”	Link to literature (poem from a written anthology of poems called the <i>Kokin Wakashu</i>) recognized	Spoken elements prominent in Noh and because language is important, not being able to understand makes it difficult for outsiders.
Many word endings in o or i		
Determined number of syllables		
Each syllable clearly enunciated		Providing a translation would help

The idea of the arts as a powerful vehicle for representing and transmitting cultural understandings was recognized by Filipino participants, pointing out that even in one short segment of a performance, within the presentation of clothes, language, body movement, etc. “bits and pieces of Japanese culture were hidden.”

For the Filipino participants, the sample performance of Takasago exemplified the qualities of control, reserved elegance and sophistication, politeness, and discipline that they associated with Japanese culture. Visual elements, such as the costumes and pine tree backdrop were easier for Filipinos to situate as Japanese than Noh chanting, which for most participants was unfamiliar and very different from the casual Japanese speech they had previously encountered or were familiar with. On the other hand, Japanese costumes were

considered well recognized outside Japan, including in the Philippines, allowing non-Japanese observers to “infer” by association that the performance is “Japanese”. In a sense, this recognition can be seen as confirming or revealing stereotypes held about Japan by the Filipino participants.

The presence of a single *shite* (main actor) or *waki* (supporting actor) on the Noh stage was seen by Filipino participants as the analog of a hierarchical society based on seniority, and the presence of mainly elderly males in the group as a manifestation of Japan’s aging population, a situation which is “known worldwide.”

One Filipino participant claimed that there are certain (unspecified) performances in the Philippines which use the same tone of voice as that used by the men in the Takasago example and that both the Takasago play and Filipino rituals involve the eldest or more senior person as

the leader performer in the ritual. Another contrasted Japanese Noh with the Filipino *Putong* or *Tubong*, citing Turner (96-121) in presenting *Putong/Tubong* as a complex form of expressive behavior in which chant, music, poetry, magical act, and dance movement are entangled in significant social events during which the *manunubong* chant gracefully in unison.

Reflecting on how performances in the Philippines differed from Japan, at least based on the example of Takasago, greater Western influence, and similarity between theatrical productions in the Philippines and those of “the West” was pointed out. While differing, it appeared clear to Filipino participants that both they and the Japanese incorporated their own beliefs and value systems in the performances. One shared value that arose was the idea that “both Filipinos and Japanese are known for being hard workers.”

Apparent differences in costumes, use of background music, body movement, and language were pointed out, with Filipino background music seen as sometimes being loud to the point where it might drown out actors’ or actresses’ voices. In contrast to the stage arrangement and number of actors in the Takasago example, Philippine theatricals were thought to incorporate a great deal more “extras” who were just quietly mingling in the background. The influence of different religious beliefs on performance practice was also recognized. For example, Christianity in the Philippines has influenced Filipino theater forms, such as *Panunuluyan*, *Senakulo*, and *Moriones*, which contrasts with the influence of Buddhism (and Shinto) on Noh in Japan.

In terms of bodily movement, a stark contrast between the underlying characteristics of Filipino and Japanese performances appeared: “Traditional Filipino performances enjoy using light and fast choreography, such as the *tinikling*, and never leave their hands unmoving.” The extreme minimalism of [*Takasago*] was seen as the polar opposite of the “extravagance” and “brightness” of music and choreography in the Philippines.

Even Philippine performances that are the counterpart of the Takasago Noh example were thought to be generally livelier and more dynamic, emphasizing the idea of minimalism vs extravagance. What participants saw as the solemn, serious, calm, and peaceful atmosphere of Noh had no immediate analog amongst the Filipino performances with which they were familiar and which they characterized as vigorous, energetic, and loud. This is in line with the comments of Filipino migrants to New Zealand in an early study, in which they “emphasized the explosive volume of music at *fiestas*, the fact the Philippines was a ‘noisy’ country, and that Filipinos in general liked loud music” (Rockell, 2009, p238).

Minimalism, whereby the audience’s imagination is prompted by the provision of limited semiotic resources by the performers was thought by Filipino participants to be what made the performance Japanese. In contrast, both Spanish-influenced Filipino performances, as well as the traditional performances of indigenous Filipino groups, were described as vivid, lively, and fast-paced. Meanwhile, although solemnity is found in a religious context in the Philippines, the solemnity in Noh is something not easily observed in the “very energetic Filipino people.”

For both the Filipino and Japanese participants in this study, Noh was seen as a “pure” Japanese form. Filipino participants were quick to point out the historical Spanish influence on traditional plays, such as *Sarswela*, *Comedia*, and *Bodabil*, but there was no evidence at all of awareness of corresponding influences on Japanese Noh coming from China or Mainland Asia.

This idea of a “pure form” contrasts with the continuous recognition of ethnic diversity and the extent of foreign influences on the part of Filipino participants, which was seen as a reason for the great variety of Philippine performances that exist today.

4. CONCLUSION

The original research design for this study still has much potential and could be carried out by focusing on many more different intercultural combinations and performance genres.

As a formal project, however, after multiple extensions, it has run its course. And as a researcher, it will be a tremendous psychological relief to be able to set it aside, letting go of the constant anxiety and sense of responsibility trying to make something work while all the circumstances have conspired against it.

Although much reduced and far from the original goal, the data presented above can be seen as one corner piece of an uncompleted jigsaw puzzle; something left to be taken up again with fresh energy in the future. It could also be seen from the perspective of Zen painting; minimal strokes are suggestive of a whole and evoke meditative contemplation.

Noh’s survival and the longevity of the form mean that it is available to all people to enable them to learn about and appreciate Japanese culture and publicly available, pre-recorded examples, such as the excerpt used in this project increase potential access even more.

This in turn reawakens the question as to whether the true meaning of performance is hidden and only available to insider audiences.

The Filipino participants in this project showed themselves to know much about Japan, including cultural aspects. At the same time, the reverse was not the case. Based on their feedback, all participants both Japanese and

Filipino experienced an increased appreciation for Noh as a result of the project.

Indeed, there were also several unexpected spin-offs or outgrowths of the project that helped to frame this final step positively as a springboard into the next phase of inquiry. These include being forced to focus more on Japan-based teaching activity resulting in the creation of several COVID-19-related original Noh plays and being directed to contact the Siraya people in Taiwan.

In retrospect, while this study set out to examine performing arts as a bridge to intercultural understanding in the context of increasingly multicultural societies as a result case of the COVID-19-related disruption that the world experienced, it appears that in increasingly segregated societies such a bridge maybe even more critical to avoid internet-induced ethnocentrism. The COVID-19 disruption simultaneously drew attention to the importance of live music, while encouraging people to draw on digital platforms, and find new ways of doing things. Recognizing this, future work will focus more on digital performance resources, exploring how performers, technicians/engineers, editors and curators help the performing arts operate as a site of learning and intercultural exchange.

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